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ABSTRACT

In standard American English, the word "like" has several senses associated with it, the earliest of which dates to the 14th century. Some meanings reflect recent developments in the language and suggest that the lexical aspects of the word are changing toward a more grammatical function. Analysis of historical information and data collected in conversational discourse suggests that the older meanings have a more limited scope, and the newer meanings are therefore able to contain more of the proposition that is relative to a more general meaning. As the word's scope becomes broader, the semantic content becomes more general. In the early stages of grammaticalization, the meaning of the lexical item gradually becomes bleached, and an impoverished form emptied of semantic specificity results. "Like" appears to be in the early stages of grammaticalization because the various lexical meanings that have survived over time now co-exist with newer, more generalized forms. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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IT'S LIKE, 'WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE EVOLUTION OF LIKE?': A Theory of Grammaticalization

Teresa Meehan

Abstract: In standard American English, the word *like* has several senses associated with it, the earliest of which dates back to the 14th century according to the OED. Some of these senses, however, reflect more recent developments in the language and suggest that the lexical aspects of the word are changing in the direction toward a more grammatical function. This paper presents a historical analysis of the use of the word *like* and posits a possible grammaticalization path in an attempt to explain the current usage of like in modern-day English.

Introduction

This paper is concerned with language change, and in particular, the use of the word *like* in current American English. The type of change to be illustrated here is termed 'grammaticalization' which has been defined by Christian Lehmann as a process which may not only change a lexical into a grammatical item, but may also shift an item from a less grammatical to a more grammatical status. 'Grammaticalization is a process of gradual change, and its products may have different degrees of grammaticality' (Lehmann 1982:13). Therefore, a diagram of a typical grammaticalization path represented as stages of change is given in example (1) as follows:

(1) lexical item ---> free grammatical morpheme
---> affix

I will discuss this process in more detail in a later section of this paper.

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In 1988, Robert Underhill wrote a paper in which he claims that in a nonstandard variety of English, the word *like* functions as a particle that marks new or focused information in a sentence or clause as in his example that follows:

(2) But then the first day of our skiing, you know we're gettin all excited to go skiing the first day it's *like* snowing ... blizzard snowing

According to Underhill, '*Snowing* and *blizzard snowing* are new information here, and significant information, since they set the mood and conditions for subsequent events' (Underhill 1988:235). Underhill also notes that he has noticed a decline in this particular usage of *like* and believes it may now be becoming archaic.

Contrary to Underhill's prescriptive claim that the above use of *like* is 'ungrammatical' in standard English (assuming he is referring to standard American English), in this paper, I will argue that this relatively new usage of *like* is still very much alive rather than becoming archaic. In addition, I will argue that this new meaning of *like* has developed out of an older meaning which is becoming more generalized in the same way that other grammatical morphemes change their meaning in the process of grammaticalization. All of the data to be used as examples throughout this text I collected through interaction in conversational discourse. At times, I was a speaking participant and at other times an acknowledged hearing participant. None of the example sentences are ad hoc, but rather, they are actual utterances made by native speakers of American English. Because of the unsystematic way in which I collected the data, it is not appropriate for quantitative analysis, and so the data has not been analyzed for the frequency of use according to age group or sex.

In this paper, I will examine the major uses of *like* in the chronological order in which they developed (according to the OED), and the proper mechanisms of change that can explain the sequence of developments. I will show how changes in the syntactic constituents that could occur within the scope of *like* were accompanied by changes in the meaning of *like* (or maybe vice versa).

Meaning Variations

The Old English form of the adjective *gelic*, where the morpheme *ge* (or ga) corresponds in meaning to the Latin *com-* as in *conformis* plus *lic* from the reconstructed proto-European form **liko* meaning body or form, originally had the meaning of 'having the form of'.

According to the OED, the comparative sense of *like* which I will refer to as the 'similar to' sense is an adverbial extension of the adjectival use which means 'in the same manner or to the same extent as'. This form of *like* is found in written texts as early as the 14th century. Some examples of the earlier usage are given in (4a) and (b) as follows:

(4a) MADAME D'ARBLAY (1779) Diary & Letters

She sings *like* her, laughs *like* her, talks *like* her.

(b) JOHN MORLEY (1886) Voltaire

The name of Voltaire will stand out *like* the names of the great decisive movements in the European advance.

Some examples of the 'similar to' sense as it is used in modern English are given in (5a-d).

Similar to:

(5a) ... they stick'em right to the glass *like* Garfield cats.

(b) ... it's kinda *like* playin' house.

(c) That sounded *like* a lecture.

(d) ... now we're *like* brother and sister.

Note that in each of the above examples, the scope of *like* includes a post-verbal noun phrase. By the scope of the word *like*, I mean the domain of the operation of the semantic element. The positioning of *like* in the sentence is never random although to some hearers it may seem so.

Often times, *like* is interpreted as having a reading which I will refer to as 'approximately'. Dating back to the 14th century, the usage of *like* in the sense of relating approximation was used as 'something like' as in example (6).

(6) JEREMY BENTHAM (1793) Works

The L600-a-year ... I do not look upon as anything *like* adequate.

This last example is still possible in modern English, however, perhaps a more common usage is in the context of quantity phrases. This reading can be thought of as a specific interpretation of 'similar to' which is illustrated in examples (7a-d).

Approximately:

(7a) I wanted it *like* about this short.

(b) I wrote it in *like* ten minutes.

(c) There was *like* ten tornadoes that touched the ground.

(d) ... it cut *like* a hundred-mile path.

The specific interpretation of 'similar to' is reflected in the scope of 'approximately' in that *like* in these cases occurs before quantitative noun phrases which is also where the new information is generally located.

Another meaning that I believe developed from the sense of 'similar to' is that which I will refer to as the 'as if' reading. It also has a comparative usage and as I pointed out in the case of 'approximately', its function can also be interpreted as being more specific than 'similar to'. An example of its early use is found in (8) as follows:

(8) Harper's Magazine (1886)

None of them act *like* they belonged to the hotel.

Examples of the modern English usage follow in (9a-d).

As if:

(9a) *Like* you could afford the house I want.

(b) ... and it was *like* she cut a lot more of mine.

(c) ... it was *like* I was watching someone else do it.

(d) ... it's not *like* I don't love you guys.

The specific interpretation of 'as if' differs from that of 'approximately' however, in that its scope is much broader.

The 'as if' reading of *like* takes an entire clause. One might also note here that *like* functions somewhat like a complementizer in that it cannot be taken out before the clause.

Another meaning of *like* that didn't come into use until the 19th century is one I will refer to as 'for example'. Here, *like* is introducing a particular example and can often be replaced with the phrase 'such as'. An illustration of this usage is given in example (10).

(10) ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON (1899) Letters

A critic like you is one who fights the good fighting, contending with stupidity.

Examples of current usage are given in (11a-f) as follows:

For Example:

(11a) You go through a text *like* a Shakesperean play.

(b) Tell *like* maybe how you got interested in it.

(c) ... it might be difficult if you start *like* in the fall.

(d) There are some other examples of past habituals *like* ... *like* when we use...

(e) Do you have *like* a mint or something?

(f) *Like* what?

The scope for the meaning of 'for example' is also much broader than that of 'similar to'. As is illustrated in the previous examples, the scope can include a noun phrase, a prepositional phrase or an entire clause.

Also, it can be noted that the information contained in the scope of the word *like* tends to be the new information in which the listeners attention should be focused. In these examples as in all of those given up to this point, *like* cannot be removed; therefore, *like* still has enough meaning that it cannot be considered simply a marker of information organization. However, the broadening of the scope is an indication that the meaning is becoming more generalized.

The various meanings of *like* that have been discussed so far all have fairly concrete definitions associated with them. While they serve as a general overview of what might be considered the traditional uses of *like*, not every possible usage has been discussed. For example, *like* is used in mathematics as an adjective for describing 'like quantities or like signs'. In addition, there is the suffix '-like' which is used when forming adjectives and adverbs. According to the OED, this suffixal form developed from the 'similar to' sense and may now be appended to almost all nouns including proper names.

The most recent usage of *like* cited in the OED refers to a North American colloquialism of the following construction: 'like' + adj. as in (12a-b).

(12a) I had to wash my hair because it was *like* gross.

(b) I think he's *like* borderline.

A construction of this type appears similar to that illustrated under 'approximately' except that it occurs before adjectives rather than quantitative noun phrases. The main difference

with this construction as opposed to the previous senses that I have discussed is that *like* in this sense seems to be bleached of most of its lexical meaning. In both sentences (12a) and (b), the lexical item *like* could be removed and the overall semantics of the utterance would remain unchanged. Therefore, I would like to hypothesize that the main function of *like* in these constructions is to focus the listeners attention on specific information.

In addition, the OED claims that there are other less analyzable constructions. This is where Underhill's 'ungrammatical' use of *like* comes in. It is true that in this sense, *like* does not seem to have a concrete definition; however, this is added support for a hypothesis that says the meaning is becoming more generalized and its usage is becoming more grammatical than lexical. As Underhill hypothesized, *like* in the constructions illustrated in (13a-i) signals new or focused information in the sentence or clause.

Focus:

(13a) She *like* covered the mirror.

(b) Yeah ... and *like* he's really gonna be drownin' his sorrows tonight.

(c) I think he's *like* borderline.

(d) She's *like* really pregnant.

(e) We could do *like* sports comic books.

(f) I was *like* throwing up all morning and night.

(g) I want to *like* minor in communications.

(h) *Like* it was 25 years ago when I had him as an instructor.

(i) ... it's *like* about general knowledge.

What each of the above examples has in common is that *like* is used to put focus on various parts of the sentence, whether it is a simple noun phrase or an entire clause. Notice that all of the sentences would still be grammatical even if *like* were omitted completely.

The function of *like* as focusing on new information begins to be seen in the 'approximately' sense. The quantifying information in the noun phrase is the information to be focused upon. From there, one might be able to see how the focusing function is broadened to include not only a noun phrase but also a prepositional phrase or an entire clause in the 'for example' sense. Although as was pointed out earlier in this paper, where *like* in the 'approximately' and 'for example' senses still has enough semantic content that it cannot be removed from the sentence, it is possible to posit that because *like* is positioned right before the new information it is in the process of being reanalyzed as a marker of that new information. In the cases of the *like* + adjective constructions as well as the focus constructions, *like* is semantically bleached enough that it is really more of a grammatical item marking focus. In the latter two constructions, *like* can be completely removed from the utterances and the change in meaning is limited to less focus being placed on a particular portion of the utterance. For example, see (14) and (15).

Like with semantic content:

(14) That sounded *like* a lecture.
*That sounded a lecture.

Focus marker:

(15) She's *like* really pregnant.
She's really pregnant.

Where *like* acts like a focus marker and is removed, the focus of the sentence is more likely to be placed on the subject 'She' rather than the adjectival phrase describing the state of being.

There is another usage of *like* that needs to be addressed. That is, the use of *like*, as illustrated in examples (16a-f), is strongly associated with the quoted expression that follows in each case. While assuming an actual expression is uttered, what appears in the quote may or may not have been expressed vocally at a certain point in time.

Quote:

(16a) I'm *like* 'What's going on here?'

(b) It's *like* 'How am I supposed to know?'

(c) I'm calling Melissa but she's *like* 'No!'

(d) We kinda felt *like* ... 'Well, (laugh) we had done it.'

(e) ... and he's *like* 'Well I don't think I'll be here next year.'

(f) I was *like* 'Uh - uh!'

This usage of *like* appears to be more grammaticalized than the 'focus *like*'. Its construction has a fixed position, namely, before an embedded clause which is interpreted as a quote. As an item becomes more grammatical, its position will become fixed. Where 'focus *like*' is still considered a free grammatical morpheme because its scope can vary between a

post-verbal noun phrase and an entire clause, a grammatical morpheme that is fixed is more likely to become an affix as it passes through the stages of grammaticalization.

The problem lies with trying to figure out the origination of the 'quotative *like*'. I hypothesize that it begins with the sense of 'as if', where *like* functions as a quasi-complementizer in that its scope already encompasses an entire clause. In other words, its position has already been fixed and because it has undergone some semantic bleaching, *like* which occurs before quotes focuses on the information contained in the quoted clause.

I mentioned that the information contained in the embedded quote following *like* in these constructions is not necessarily an exact replication of an utterance that was actually spoken. In a related study done by Patricia Mayes (n.d.), from the University of California, Santa Barbara, she discovered that many quotes in informal spoken discourse are invented and that their main function is as dramatizations. She reports that the most reliable way to distinguish a direct quote from an indirect quote is by the verb tense. Direct quotes have a deictic center that is the same as the original utterance. 'In telling about a past event, the speaker may use present or even future tense in the quote.' In contrast, indirect quotes have a reference point according to the speaking time.

According to Mayes, there are various psychological reasons for a speaker to use direct quotation in discourse. Among these, the direct quote is used to 'highlight' the main point of narratives and emphasizes the involvement of the speaker in the story. The actual content of direct quotes is found to be very rarely an exact replication of an utterance that was actually spoken at some point in time, but rather, is more often made up for the purpose of expressing affect. Mayes (n.d.) explains:

> Speakers will choose whether to use a direct or an indirect quote depending on how much affective information they want to convey. In the context of casual conversation ... speakers are more likely to maximize the amount of affective information conveyed.

Referring back to the type of quotes that are in the scope of *like* in this context, we can see that they do in fact behave like the direct quotes described by Mayes. In all of the examples that I have here, (16a-f), the tense of the verb in the quoted clause, if there is a verb present at all, is in the present tense with the exception of clause (d). The fact that the quotes are generally very emotive suggests that their purpose is to express affect and it is fairly certain that the quotes are reflections of feelings rather than exact replications of previous utterances. One might say that the purpose of *like* in these constructions is to focus on the highlighted information expressed in the quote. In addition, *like* is still reflecting the old 'similar to' meaning since the information contained in the quote is not exact.

Conclusion

In an historical sense, some interesting things have happened with regard to the development of meaning associated with the word *like* in correlation with the scope of the word. Table (1) gives a synchronic account of this process and reveals an interesting pattern.

Meaning	Earliest Documentation	Present-day Scope
		(post verbal)
Similar to	1300	NP
Approximately	1590	NP (quant.)
		(post verbal or clause)
As if	1386	Clause
For example	1886	NP, PP Clause
(no lexical meaning)		
Focus *like*	1959	NP, VP ADJ., Clause
Quote *like*	1960+	Clause

Table (1): Historical Analysis

Table (1) shows that the older meanings have a more limited scope than the newer meanings. Therefore, the newer meanings are able to contain more of the proposition which is relative to a more general meaning. As the scope of the word becomes broader, the semantic content becomes more general. The sense of 'for example' contains its specialized interpretation as well as relating the 'similar to' sense and in addition operates as a marker of new information in a clause.

In the early stage of grammaticalization, the meaning of the lexical item gradually becomes semantically bleached. The full meaning is bleached out during the process of innovative

speech over time and an impoverished form, one which is emptied of its semantic specificities results (Heine, et al 1990). This is precisely what I believe to be happening with the forms of *like* that I have labelled as focus *like* and quotative *like*. I argue that *like* is in the early stage of grammaticalization because its various lexical meanings, which have survived over time, are co-existing with newer more generalized forms.

As a result, table (2) illustrates a proposed grammaticalization path for the lexical item *like*.

1400	1800	1950+	
More Lexical			More Grammatical
----------	----------	----------	---------->
Similar to		Focus	
Approximately		Quotes	
As if			
For example			

Table (2): Proposed Grammaticalization Path

Again, it is important to keep in mind that all of these senses are presently coexisting. Historically, the 'similar to' sense has the earliest documentation and is probably the source from which the specialized interpretations of 'approximately', 'as if', and 'for example' developed. The focus *like* and the quotative *like* are probably not separate developments in that their main functions are to put added emphasis on the new information in the utterance. Evidence of their relationship to the 'similar to' sense is given by the lack of exactness in the quoted information and the fact that in the focus *like* clauses the *like* not only functions to highlight the new information, but also allows the speaker to pull back from the assertion in a rather non-committal fashion.

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